

Power exponential velocity distributions in disordered porous media

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Velocity distribution functions link the micro- and macro-level theories of fluid flow through porous media. Here we study them for the fluid absolute velocity and its longitudinal and lateral components relative to the macroscopic flow direction in a model of a random porous medium. We claim that all distributions follow the power exponential law controlled by an exponent γ and a shift parameter u_0 and examine how these parameters depend on the porosity. We find that γ has a universal value $1/2$ at the percolation threshold and grows with the porosity, but never exceeds 2.

The physics of viscous flows through porous media is important in such diverse areas of technology as oil recovery, energy storage, and tumor treatment [1–3]. Such flows, however, are notorious for their complexity stemming both from randomness of the medium and complicated interactions of different fluid particles. Macroscopic parameters characterizing fluid transport in porous media, like permeability (the ability of a porous system to transmit fluids) depend on a multitude of geometry-related parameters such as porosity, granule (or fracture) shape and size distribution, and specific surface area. This dependency, however, is nonuniversal and to a large extent known only through phenomenology or approximate theories.

The complete information about the flow of an incompressible fluid in a particular porous sample is contained in the velocity field. While this quantity can be studied both experimentally [4–7] and numerically [8, 9], it is sample-dependent. Therefore, to get a better insight into the connection between the macroscopic properties of the flow and the irregular structure of the medium, one needs mathematical tools that take into account randomness of the porous matrix and filter out irrelevant, sample-dependent information contained in the full velocity field. One such tool is the velocity distribution function (vdf) [4–6], which is the probability density function of the fluid velocity magnitude u or its longitudinal (u_L) or transverse (u_T) components. We will use a convenience notation f , f_L , and f_T to denote the vdfs corresponding to u , u_L , and u_T , respectively, and f_L^+ and f_L^- to denote f_L restricted to $\mathbb{R}_{>0}$ and $\mathbb{R}_{<0}$, respectively.

Unlike the famous Maxwell-Boltzmann distribution for the ideal gas, vdfs for a fluid flow reflect the structure of the medium rather than the effect of the inter-particle collisions. Despite this difference, the vdfs are also closely related to important macroscopic parameters. For example, f and f_L immediately imply the value of the hydraulic tortuosity (τ) [10], a quantity that measures the mean elongation of fluid paths in a porous medium

$$\tau \equiv \frac{\langle u \rangle}{\langle u_L \rangle} = \frac{\int_V f(u) u \, du}{\int_V f_L(u_L) u_L \, du_L}, \quad (1)$$

where the integrals are taken over the volume V of the porous sample. Similarly, for flows obeying Darcy's law

[11], e.g. groundwater flows, the permeability (κ) can be related to the mean fluid velocity along the macroscopic flow direction

$$\kappa = \varphi \mu \frac{\langle u_L \rangle}{|\nabla P|}, \quad (2)$$

where φ is the porosity of the medium, μ is the dynamic viscosity of the fluid, and ∇P is the pressure gradient. Thus, the vdfs can serve as a link between two macroscopic parameters, κ and τ .

Several reports on f , f_L , and f_T for various porous systems at low Reynolds number ($\text{Re} \ll 1$) are already available. Physically, for arguments much smaller than $\langle u \rangle$ their form is dominated by contributions from stagnant zones (dead-end pores and the volumes in the proximity of the fluid-solid boundary) [8], whereas for arguments $\gtrsim \langle u \rangle$ their form reflects the properties of the conducting backbone, or the fluid paths carrying most of the fluid transport. For this reason the vdf is usually investigated in two physically distinct regimes: small ($u \lesssim \langle u \rangle$) and high ($u \gtrsim \langle u \rangle$) fluid velocities. In the former case, the local fluid kinetic energy at percolation follows a power law [8], which implies a similar, power-law behavior for $f(u)$, $u \ll \langle u \rangle$. Far from percolation, however, the form of $f(u)$ for small u depends on the porous matrix structure [12] and appears to be nonuniversal, therefore it will not be considered here.

In contrast to the case of small velocities, the available results suggest the existence of some universality in the form of the vdfs for $u \gtrsim \langle u \rangle$. The findings of different research groups, however, appear to be inconsistent with each other. On the one hand, several theoretical [5], experimental [5] and numerical [12, 13] results suggest that $f(u)$ can be approximated by a Gaussian with the maximum shifted towards the mean fluid velocity. On the other hand, however, several teams reported nearly exponential vdfs with the maximum located at 0. This includes an experimental study on f , f_L^+ , and f_T [6], as well as experiments [4, 14] and numerical simulations [14, 15] for f_L^+ . Moreover, a qualitative transition from an exponential to a Gaussian form of f was found for various sphere packings [16]; however, in each case f peaked at $u = 0$. Finally, Siena et al. [17] suggested that f_L^+ follows

the stretched exponential function

$$f_L^+(u_L/\langle u_L \rangle) \propto (u_L/\langle u_L \rangle)^{\gamma-1} \exp[-\beta (u_L/\langle u_L \rangle)^\gamma], \quad (3)$$

where β, γ are model parameters.

Although Eq. (3) encompasses both the exponential and Gaussian distributions, it is not applicable to the systems with the distribution maximum shifted from 0. As a consequence, it predicts that the values of γ can be much larger than 2 [17], a result not corroborated by any other research.

To reconcile this difficulty, we conjecture that for $u \gtrsim \langle u \rangle$ the velocity distribution functions follow the exponential power distribution

$$f(u) = a \exp \left[- \left(\frac{u - u_0}{u_w} \right)^\gamma \right] \quad (4)$$

(and similar formulas for f_L^+ , f_L^- , and f_T), where $a > 0$ is the normalizing factor, $u_0 \geq 0$ determines the location of the distribution peak, $u_w > 0$ denotes the scale factor corresponding to the distribution width, and $0 < \gamma \leq 2$ is the shape factor. This is the simplest distribution that generalizes both the normal ($\gamma = 2$) and Laplace ($\gamma = 1$) distributions and allows for the shift of the distribution maximum from 0. In particular, in contrast to (3), the prefactor to the exponential function in (4) does not depend on \mathbf{u} . We also postulate that for f and f_L^+ there exists a threshold value of the porosity, φ^* , such that

$$\begin{aligned} u_0 &= 0 & \text{for } \varphi_c \leq \varphi < \varphi^*, \\ \gamma &= 2 & \text{for } \varphi^* \leq \varphi < 1, \end{aligned} \quad (5)$$

which reduces, by 1, the number of unknown parameters in (4) for any given φ . This number can be reduced to 2 by noticing that each vdf is normalized to 1.

To verify Eq. (4), we examined numerically an effectively two-dimensional model of fibrous materials with the porous matrix built of identical, freely overlapping objects randomly deposited on a regular lattice of size L [18]. We considered two obstacle shapes, disks and squares, both with the hydraulic diameter $a = 8$ lattice units (l.u.). The fluid was assumed to be incompressible and Newtonian, driven by a bulk force (gravity) small enough to ensure the creeping flow ($\text{Re} \ll 1$).

The basic numerical method used to solve the problem was the Palabos (www.palabos.org) implementation of the lattice Boltzmann method (LBM) with the Bhatnagar-Gross-Krook approximation for collisions and the numerical viscosity $\nu = 1/6$ [19–21]. While the LBM is often used for solving flows in porous media, its accuracy decreases when the channels in the porous matrix are too narrow. To verify whether this effect is significant in the model of overlapping objects, we also solved it with the finite difference (FD) method. In this case we used only square obstacles arranged so that the minimum channel width was 4 l.u. [19]. In both cases we used the

periodic boundary conditions along the macroscopic fluid flow direction. As for the transverse direction, we applied the no-slip boundary conditions in the LBM and periodic ones for the FD. To minimize the finite-size effects, the lattice size, $L = 1000$ l.u. (LBM) and 2000 l.u. (FD) was chosen to ensure that $L/a > 100$ [22] and the results were compared with those obtained for the system of size $L/2$. The simulation results were averaged over 20 independent porous samples for porosities $\varphi = 0.99, 0.95, 0.9, \dots$ down to the proximity of the percolation threshold $p_c \approx 0.4968$ for the squares [23] and ≈ 0.40 for the disks. The fluid velocity was measured at the underlying lattice nodes and binned to create histograms.

Representative results obtained for overlapping disks using the LBM are shown in Fig. 1. All velocities in this figure are normalized by $\langle u \rangle$, and hence effectively dimensionless. All data for f , f_L^+ , f_T , including those not shown, can be fitted well to Eq. (4) constrained by Eq. (5). As the porosity is increased from φ_c towards 1, a semilog plot of f changes its shape from convex (subexponential), through linear (exponential), concave (superexponential), parabolic (Gaussian centered at 0) and shifted parabolic (Gaussian shifted towards $\langle u \rangle$). The form of f_L^+ closely follows that of f , but f_L^- vanishes faster than f_L^+ , especially far from φ_c . The exponent γ corresponding to f_T also turns out to be φ -dependent, though its value never reaches 2 (Fig. 2). This extends the experimental findings of Ref. [6], where $\gamma \approx 1$ was reported for f_T at a fixed φ that was chosen far from both φ_c and 1. Note, however, that the current simulations cannot be used to reliably estimate γ for f_T in the limit of $\varphi \rightarrow 1$, as in this limit the number of obstacles becomes very small and hence a large value of L is required to avoid finite-size effects. It is thus possible that in this limit γ tends to 2. The threshold value $\varphi^* \approx 0.85$ for f is close to its counterpart ≈ 0.87 for f_L^+ ; the accuracy of our simulations was insufficient to tell if they are actually different from each other. As expected, u_0 turns out a continuous function of φ , growing from 0 for $\varphi \leq \varphi^*$ to $\langle u \rangle$ for $\varphi = 1$ (Fig. 2, inset). Similar results were obtained for overlapping squares (data not shown). As for f_L^- , which controls the probability distribution of negative values of u_L , we found that its tail is well described by exponential power distribution with $\gamma = 0.5$ for all φ (Fig. 3). This conclusion was drawn from simulations for $\varphi \leq 0.85$, as for higher porosities the decay of f_L^- is so rapid, cf. Fig. 1, that no reliable fitting of the data is possible. The value of $\gamma = 0.5$ is also consistent with the experimental results obtained recently in Ref. [6] (Fig. 3) and our simulation data for overlapping disks (data not shown). The contribution of f_L^- to the transport is negligible compared to that of f_L^+ only for relatively high porosities. Consequently, simplified theories that assume $f_L^- \equiv 0$ [24] are invalid close to φ_c .

Thus, the following general picture emerges. At the percolation threshold all four velocity distribution func-

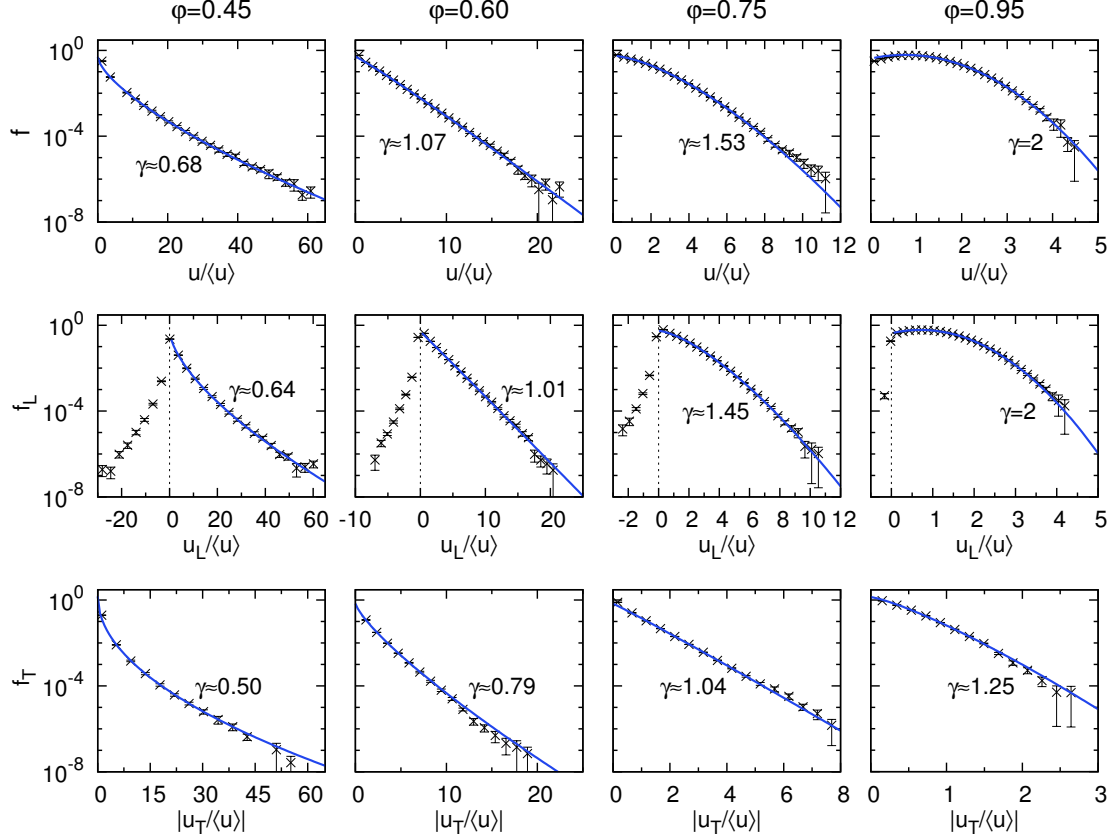


FIG. 1. (Color online) The probability distributions f (top row), f_L (middle), and f_T (bottom) for selected porosities $\varphi = 0.45, 0.60, 0.75, 0.95$ (in columns, from left to right) obtained for overlapping disks. Solid lines show fits to Eq. (4).

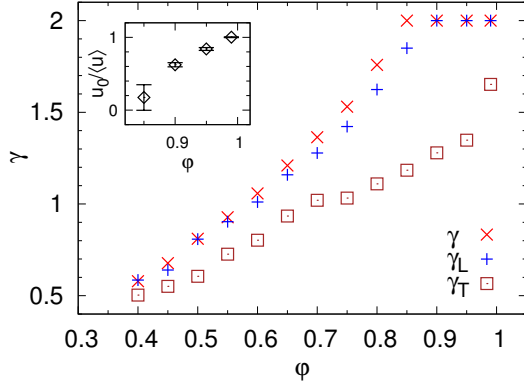


FIG. 2. (Color online) Exponent γ for f (\times), f_L^+ ($+$), and f_T (\square) as a function of porosity for overlapping disks. The symbol size roughly corresponds to the uncertainty of the results. Inset: $u_0/\langle u \rangle$ as a function of porosity for f and $\varphi > \varphi^* \approx 0.85$.

tions, f , f_L^+ , f_L^- , and f_T decay in accordance with the power exponential distribution (4) with $u_0 = 0$ and $\gamma = 1/2$. As the porosity is increased, γ remains constant for f_L^- , but increases for f , f_L^+ , and f_T . At some

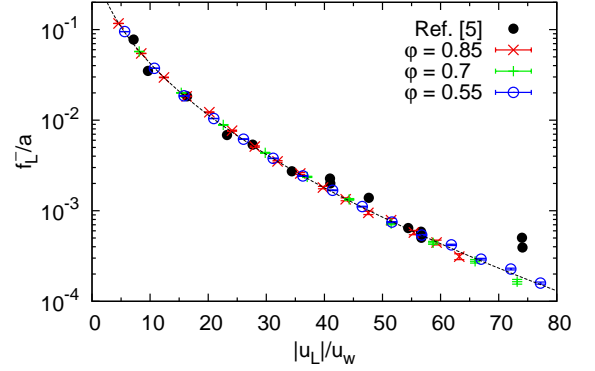


FIG. 3. (Color online) Scaling of f_L^- according to Eq. (4) with $u_0 = 0$ and γ fixed at 0.5. Open symbols show the results for overlapping squares at porosity $\varphi = 0.55, 0.7, 0.85$; filled circles represent the experimental data of Ref. [6]. The dashed line is the scaling function $g(x) = \exp(-\sqrt{x})$.

threshold porosity φ^* the exponent γ determined for f or f_L^+ reaches the maximum value of 2. As the porosity is increased above φ^* , γ stays fixed at 2 whereas parameter u_0 becomes φ -dependent and grows from 0 to $\langle u \rangle$ as φ ap-

proaches 1. Therefore, a vdf in a random porous medium is either subexponential ($\gamma < 1$), exponential ($\gamma = 1$), superexponential ($2 > \gamma > 1$), or normal ($\gamma = 2$). If $\gamma = 2$, the corresponding vdf depends on the porosity through the shift parameter u_0 .

The significance of Eq. (4) is related to several factors. First, it describes the statistical properties of the microscopic velocity field for the velocities $u \gtrsim \langle u \rangle$ that have a major contribution to the advective transport. Second, it is a relatively simple formula with only two unknown parameters at any given porosity. Third, the dependence of at least one of these parameters, γ , on the porosity also appears to be fairly simple: in the model studied here it could be roughly approximated with two straight line segments (Fig. 2). Given this simplicity, Eq. (4) might be used to link porosity with vdf-dependent macroscopic parameters like permeability or tortuosity. It should also be useful in studies on several open issues, like the microscopic foundations of permeability and hydrodynamic dispersion (longitudinal and transverse) of passive solutes [25–27], the physical relevance of the tortuosity [28], and properties of the conducting backbone [26], all with immediate practical applications.

However, some important questions remain open. For example, to what extent our hypothesis remains valid for porous matrices with a complex, highly correlated structure [29]? Another problem is whether the value of $\gamma = 2$ for f and f_L^+ actually implies the absence of long-range correlations in the velocity field above φ^* [6] or perhaps these correlations do remain and require that the power exponential distribution be supplemented with some less significant terms?

In summary, we propose that a general form of the velocity distribution functions in disordered porous media is given by a power exponential distribution with the shape factor γ and location parameter u_0 such that $1/2 \leq \gamma \leq 2$ and either $u_0 = 0$ or $\gamma = 2$. Moreover, γ has a universal, porosity-independent value $1/2$ both at the percolation threshold and for the negative part of the velocity component parallel to the macroscopic fluid flow direction. Our findings resolve several apparently conflicting reports on the velocity distribution functions and open a new perspective on the formulation of a statistical theory of transport in porous media.

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